

Looking back to the foundation of the Corcovado National Park, a crown jewel of nature in Costa Rica¹

Una mirada retrospectiva a la fundación del Parque Nacional Corcovado, una corona de joyas de la naturaleza en Costa Rica

Alvaro UGALDE

Note (by the editors): Alvaro Ugalde is the person to whom we owe the foundation of the Corcovado National Park and the conservation of many other jewels of nature in Costa Rica. He became Director of the Costa Rican National Park Service during the presidency of Daniel Oduber (1974–1978). His activity in the park service spans more than 30 years, serving as its director from 1974–1986 and later from 1991–1993. He was named an “Environmental Leader of the Century” by Time Magazine in 1999, in a special issue on “Leaders of the Millennium for Latin America”.

Abstract (by the editors): This paper consists of the personal reminiscences of Alvaro Ugalde, the man who initiated the foundation of the Corcovado National Park on the Osa Peninsula and later became the Director of the National Park Service of Costa Rica. He describes with great humour his first encounter with the area in 1965 as “a gold miner for a few hours”, while accompanying an American couple who had moved from Texas to Costa Rica to search for gold in the Osa Peninsula. The idea to create a national park on the peninsula arose in the early 1970s, at a time when Daniel Oduber, a person of great capacity, open-mindedness and authority, was president of Costa Rica. The direct impetus was a letter from an Italian naturalist who highlighted the scenic and biological value of the Osa Peninsula and pleaded for its protection. Ugalde succeeded in enthusing Oduber and other politicians to the idea. The greatest problem was to get rid of the ca. 160 squatters who lived in the area considered for protection. Luckily, a local congressman (disputado) of the then strong Communist party approved the creation of the park, if full compensation to all people affected was granted. Though the necessary resources were provided by the government, compensation proved difficult in practice. However, the manifold difficulties were finally overcome and the Corcovado National Park was granted its destiny.

Key words: Costa Rica, Corcovado National Park, Alvaro Ugalde, Daniel Oduber.

Resumen (por el editor): El documento se compone de recuerdos personales de Alvaro Ugalde, quien inició la fundación del Parque Nacional Corcovado en la Península de Osa y más tarde se convirtió en el Director del Servicio de Parques Nacionales de Costa Rica.

En palabras humorísticas describe el primer encuentro con la zona en 1965, como un “oro minero por unas pocas horas”, es decir como acompañante de una pareja americana que se trasladó desde Texas a Costa Rica para buscar oro en la Península de Osa. La idea de crear un parque nacional en la península, surgió a principios de los setenta, cuando Daniel Oduber, una persona de gran capacidad, sin prejuicios y autoridad, fue presidente de Costa Rica. El impulso directo fue de una carta de un naturalista italiano que destacó el valor escénico y biológico de la Península de Osa y abogó por su protección. Ugalde logró entusiasmar a Oduber y a otros políticos con esta idea. El mayor problema fue erradicar a los aprox. 160 ocupantes ilegales que vivían en la zona considerada de protección. Por suerte, un congresista local (diputado) del entonces fuerte partido comunista aprobó la creación del parque, si la indemnización total a todas las personas afectadas era concedida. Aunque los recursos necesarios fueron proporcionados por el gobierno, la indemnización resultó difícil en la práctica. Sin embargo, las múltiples dificultades pudieron finalmente ser superadas y el Parque Nacional Corcovado logró llegar a su destino.

Palabras clave: Costa Rica, Parque Nacional Corcovado, Alvaro Ugalde, Daniel Oduber.

¹ Excerpts from transcripts of Alvaro Ugalde Oral History. Recorded by Evelyn T. Lennette, copyright Nectandra Institute, San Ramon, Costa Rica. 2007.

In order to better understand the story of Corcovado, first I want to speak briefly about the state of conservation in Costa Rica around the 1960s.

I still remember the day the child-citizen number one million was born. We celebrated that event as a national accomplishment. We called him or her, El Niño Millón. And there was great expectation as to who was going to be the lucky child. That person must still be alive since the event took place early in the 1950s, around ten years after my birth.

It was in the 1940s when the government created the first national park, up the Pan-American highway, over the Talamancas, the road where my father worked on its construction for many years. In his biography, he speaks about its beauty, the huge old oak trees, the quetzals and other birds. The bill of Congress creating this national park was later repealed, because the park was never implemented. The only reason I can think of now as to why it was not, is because there was no institution in charge of national parks. Its establishment was simply a good gesture on the part of Congress and government, but nothing was really done in the field and the paper park did not survive. And the country just continued the “intelligent and good” push to log the forests, to conquer the land and to put cows and plantations of all kinds instead.

The next attempt was in 1957, when Congress created the Tourism Institute. In the same piece of legislation, it declared that all volcanic craters 2 kilometres around were national parks. But what happened again was that nobody managed these national parks either. The Tourism Institute put a cement viewpoint at Irazú Volcano, the ruins of which were still to be seen at its rim when the volcano exploded in 1963. A good thing that did happen though, was that most of these volcanoes were later included in the National Park System, but this time, including a lot more territory than the initial circles around the craters.

My first encounter with the Osa Peninsula

It was the year 1965. I was returning to Costa Rica from the United States, on a flight of the famous and now defunct Pan American Airlines. The plane stopped in every capital city of Central America and, because of severe thunderstorms, we shuttled back and forth in the area, until we finally arrived in San José, as I recall, almost completely drunk ... The crew had offered us unlimited complimentary drinks in order to calm our fears and most of us, especially my seat neighbours, had taken advantage of it.

Sitting next to me, was an American couple in their fifties, who were moving from Texas to Costa Rica in search, they said, of paradise and lots of gold. He was an old gold miner and she was a retired teacher. They had met in a bar and fallen in love. As I learned later, both were definitely alcoholics. He had talked her into marrying him and selling her home and possessions, in order to settle in Costa Rica to look for the source of gold in the Osa. To be specific, in the high watershed of the Madrigal River.

Nineteen years old and very naive, I set out to help them as much as I could, not because I believed in their crazy ideas, but because I liked them. The first crisis came that very same day. For reasons that I don't remember, their dog could not be taken out of the airport upon arrival. The animal tried to escape during the night, hurting itself so badly that it died in their hotel bed a couple of days later. It was a real and great tragedy for them, much to my disbelief.

The amount of gear to be purchased in San José in preparation for our jungle trip to the Río Madrigal, was unbelievable – food, gold-mining pans, metal detectors, tents, other camping and mining utensils, etc. ... ah, and a revolver, which I bought under my name and never saw again in my life. Finally, we chartered a small aeroplane which took us to our final destination, Río Oro de Osa. The wife stayed behind in San José.

We landed uneventfully on a small grass strip near the ocean in the middle of nowhere, and were met by excited local residents. The property was owned by a man named Don Felix Avellán. Neither Felix nor I imagined that we would meet again and again in the future.

Years later, in 1976, as I was working in the process to establish Corcovado National Park, I had to deal intensively with Don Felix, since he owned another large property inside the newly created national park, which contained another landing field, a grocery store and hundreds of cattle and pigs. Today, that is the Sirena Field Station.

As I recall, from the air, Osa was as impressive then as it is today. The area which is now Corcovado National Park, was absolutely pristine, but there were several settlers trying to make farms, 160 to be precise, as well as a lot more pastureland outside the park, around the point of the peninsula. Cattle ranching to export beef to the US swept the country in the 1960s and 1970s, and parts of the Osa were no exception. Over the years, especially in the last twenty, several foreigners have purchased and restored many of these cattle ranches outside the park, in order to make way for young forests and ecotourism enterprises.

The day after our arrival, we set out to rent horses from Don Felix and rode for a couple of hours to the mouth of the Madrigal, where we found a house owned by Don Antonio and Doña Rosa, who in very friendly terms allowed us to camp in their yard.

I wish somebody had taken photographs of us with all our gold mining gear. We must have looked like Don Quijote and his assistant Sancho Panza. I think our physical appearance also resembled this famous couple. The gold miners looked at us with kind of a hidden smile, which forewarned me about our foolishness and predicament. Antonio's and Rosa's house was full of the same kind of gear and utensils we were carrying ourselves, only that ours were shining new, while the old utensils were rusted and half buried in the sand. It was obvious that hundreds or thousands of fools like ourselves had gone through there over the decades, and gone back still poor ...

But a series of tragedies were to begin in our gold mining saga.

After dismounting from the horses, my American friend was in agony. The two-hour horseback ride had produced blisters in the very lower end of his back and, where the back loses its honest name ... and, as he got off the horse, he could hardly walk. All his gold mining spirits had kind of transformed into painful gestures, although the pain would briefly disappear when he tried to find gold. He panned for gold by washing sand in the river mouth. As is the case every time anybody tries it, tiny specks of gold were visible in the bottom of the pan. On these occasions, his face was transformed into a kind of a glorious moment, with his eyes bulging out. I thought he was really crazy. Only much later in 1985, as I was immersed in solving the gold-mining problems of the park, did I realise that he was possessed by "gold fever".

The same first night, Toño's pigs and chicken tried to eat our tent, our food and all our belongings and that infuriated my friend. The mosquitoes didn't help either.

The next day we finally set out to conquer our goal. We hired three or four gold miners as guides. They were very happy to get a day's pay, but were obviously thinking how foolish we were. They knew better.

We walked for about two hours, climbing the Rio Madrigal in the direction of its origins where, according to my friend, the big source of all the gold in the Osa was. He had purchased a map of the area, and had drawn a line from the mouth of the river to our destination; actually he had shown that map to me in the plane from the United States to Costa Rica. Since there were no trails, we walked following the river bed. It was full of

rocks, pebbles, sand, mud and water. I do not remember what kind of shoes we were wearing, but soon after, my friend began to complain about his feet hurting too much. Little did I know that the gold-mining side of our expedition was soon to take an abrupt turn.

Suddenly, my friend announced an unexpected decision to me and the others. In spite of all the expectations, money spent in utensils, flights, etc., suddenly he uttered the following words: "I can't go on, forget gold mining, let's go fishing". This, of course was the best moment for me. We hiked back to the house, threw all the utensils on top of the pile built up over the years by people like us. He pulled out his fishing rod and fishing he went.

After that moment, we were the happiest men on earth. The fishing was absolutely great and he was fully enjoying it. I went about watching the scarlet macaws and the magnificent wildlife of Osa for the first time. I was, of course, very unaware that, years later as director of the park system, I was to lead the battles to create Corcovado National Park, to save it from hunting, logging and mining. When the park was established in 1975, the Madrigal River was not part of it, but my colleagues in the park service and I made sure it was included in a park extension decree in 1982.

In the meantime, back in San José, the wife had gone crazy. For three or four days she had not heard from us and considered us lost in the jungle. She went about calling the authorities and the US Embassy and started begging for help. I do not remember exactly how many days went by, not many, but the entire fuss ended when we showed up in San José in one piece, but much poorer than when we started.

They lived in Costa Rica for several months. And, as the time went by, my family and I realised how serious were their alcoholism and mental problems. Costa Rica was no longer the paradise they called it at the beginning. One day, they left for their next heaven, Canada, and were never to be heard from to this day. I sure hope he never used my gun ...

So, this was my first encounter with Osa, as a gold miner for a few hours – an encounter that was to be imprinted in my mind forever. Osa is considered one of the most magnificent places on the planet – a place that later, through my actions and those of many others, would become Corcovado National Park, a place for which I am still fighting for, almost 40 years later ...

The establishment of Corcovado National Park

The year was 1976. The President of the Country, Daniel Oduber, looked at me with a strange smile, and asked the following question: “What, in your opinion, would be the value of Corcovado 50 years from now?” I felt like falling and falling into a black hole.

Some time during 1974, I received a call from him, in which he asked my opinion about a letter received from an Italian who had recently come back from Osa. In brief, the letter exalted the biological and scenic values of the Osa Peninsula, and pleaded to the president for its protection. My mind lit up like a candle and my heart was pumping hard. Here was I thought, “a heck of a new opportunity for the conservation of the Osa”.

In 1972, I had flown over the Osa with the then Director of the Forest Service, the branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock to which the National Parks Department then belonged. At that moment, we were able to spot around 15 squatters, or settlers in the area recommended to become a national park. He said it was too much of a problem, and no decisions were made.

But now, being the Director of the Park Service, and with full access to Don Daniel, a President with great capacity and authority, maybe the creation of Corcovado National Park had a real chance this time.

The only big problem, and the reason for his question was, that there were not just 15 squatters inside the area to be declared park, there were more than 160, some in the land owned by a large American corporation, the Osa Productos Forestales, and some in government land, or rather, land not legally claimed by anybody – a staggering and unprecedented challenge for the newly born National Parks Department.

The President’s question was subtle but loaded with philosophy. This day I had gone to see him in order to break, in my opinion, some real bad news. The cost of establishing Corcovado was not the 1.5 millions colones I had estimated initially, but 12 millions, the equivalent to two million dollars in those days. If he did not fire me this time, I would probably survive forever ...

As I went into a survival mode, I decided that his question was really a joke, and that what he really meant was, “lets do it”. I answered him with a smile and said “thank you boss, where do I go for the money?”

He instructed me to go to the Instituto de Tierras y Colonización, ITCO, the government institution in charge of helping landless farmers to get property. It was a brilliant decision. By putting together these two policies: conservation and agrarian reform, we were able to

make headway into both. ITCO came in strong, visited the newly created park, appraised the situation of each and every person there, purchased a property in the same Osa Peninsula to give it to those who really needed it and, within twenty months, Corcovado was beginning its recovery process from years of human disturbance ...

This may sound simple, but it was the biggest enterprise I have ever gone through until the present. The main challenge after the presidential decree establishing the Park, was how to get to know everybody affected without having to go house by house scattered all over the newly born park. This issue was resolved by the occupants themselves. They organised by sectors, formed committees and called their friends, the Communist Party members in our Congress or Legislative Assembly.

At that time, the Communist Party in Costa Rica was much stronger and cohesive than today. There were around six party congressmen, out of 57, and they appointed one of them to deal with this burning issue of Corcovado National Park. To me, that was the best possible scenario. Now, I had somebody to talk to and to start negotiations with. He in turn, had the ability to call large community meetings right in the park and talk to the rest of the members of congress.

My real challenge then, was to convince this congressman, diputado as we call them, that Corcovado was a special place on earth, and that it must be saved as a protected area. But this was not difficult, back then and still today, Corcovado defended itself by showing its grandeur and its uniqueness. In general terms, the communist party position was “yes, we approve the creation of the park, but we also demand full compensation to all affected”. I informed the President and his answer was: It’s a deal, and Corcovado got its chance this time. And I wasn’t fired ...

The occupants demanded full valuation and payment of everything they had in “their” properties (plants of all kinds, cattle, pigs, chickens, houses, etc., etc.), food for several months, transportation to their new destination and land to move to.

The government could not give land to everyone. In cases like this, law required that people who already owned properties did not, and still do not, qualify for the government land-programs. The people affected by Corcovado were compensated for all they owned and were given transportation to their other homes. But several of them, I would say the majority, did have the legal right to get a new piece of land. For this purpose, ITCO acquired a large property on the Gulf side of the peninsula called Cañas, and they were given construction materials to put up their new homes. The village

that formed from this re-location has the name of Cañasa until this day. We used to call it the “black city” because the roofs were covered with black tar for humidity reasons.

So, during most part of this process, we would land on the beaches of the park and walk to wherever the meetings were. I remember the big mistake in the first meeting. Other government officials decided to take some guards with us, some policemen. The first thing that we were told when we got off the plane was “if those police don’t stay here with the aeroplane, we won’t meet with you”. “Stay here, guys.” And we walked through the forest to the meeting, usually very turbulent ones. At first because they disagreed with the creation of the park and then, after they agreed on this with their communist congressman, then the arguments were about how much money each one of them was going to get, where were they going to get new land, how were they going to get their cows and pigs, their families, chickens and everything else out.

The squatters were very rough with us, because most of the time they didn’t agree on the initial appraisals, in this case made by IDA staff as ordered by the president. We have to remember that everything this president ordered on behalf of conservation was because I asked him to please do so. I drafted the letters and he signed them. And, since Daniel was the most powerful president I have ever seen in my life, at least in this country, everybody ran to carry on his orders.

IDA teams were all over the park, and they did an incredible and very difficult job. I used to be very quiet at these meetings, because the decision to establish the park had been taken, and all I had to do was how to get other agencies to get them relocated. Once the decision and the acceptance were accomplished and issue of the creation of the park was over, then negotiations were about prices, money, land, etc. So I did not have much to say since I didn’t own land, and wasn’t a member of ITCO. I represented the park service. My role was to clean the park of human activities, and my personal principle was to do it as humanely as possible, because they were terribly affected.

I would have been on their side had I been there and affected. I remember this meeting at the mouth of Rio Claro, just north of the Rio Sirena. A beautiful place, full of gold miners. There was a school there. Kids walked for hours to come to their school. If you go today, all you would find is jungle. I remember the school and the 300 or so people gathered there.

Since I get sick in small aeroplanes, I used to take a Dramamine, air sickness pill, and by the time I got to Osa, when people were ready to fight, I was ready to

sleep. I kind of sat on the roots of trees and although I didn’t fall asleep, I wasn’t eager to speak, much less to fight with them. The ITCO people were the ones doing the fight on behalf of the government. At this meeting, we ended late, almost at dark. The usual thing I did at the end meetings like this one, was to go to embrace everybody, ask them questions, where they lived, how many kids they had, where they were from, etc. One of them, I only remember his nickname “Beto Bullas” ... he was a loud speaker, blah blah blah, so he was nick named “Betto Noises”. When I asked, he said he lived behind the laguna, and being ignorant about where it was, I made the mistake to ask if I could go with him. “Are you sure, Don Alvaro?” “Yes I am sure, if you are ready I am.”

Good Lord, it meant going through swamp, three, four, five hours until we got there at midnight. It was a very, very humble place, with pigs, chickens and everything else inside and outside of the house. It was really a campsite. They gave me this little ... I can’t really call it a bed ... more like a little bench and bed at the same time, made of canes of palms. The pigs were sleeping under me. It was quite an interesting night, because of the mosquitoes, the pigs, the hike and the mud, but that’s how I got to be very good friend of Beto’s and his wife and children and everybody in the neighbourhood, ten, twelve houses across the river, a few minutes to half an hour from him.

Beto was from Perez Zeledon, San Isidro. Many of them came from there. From San Isidro to the park, they had to drive to Sierpe, from there take a canoe out to the very deadly mouth of the river. Many people died trying to cross that mouth with the more primitive technology they had then. A simple thing today for the tourist hotels, going through that mouth with huge waves in boats with powerful engines. Then, they would take the ocean to a certain cove in Corcovado, near Llorona; then they would hike for hours to wherever they had their camp.

I remember Beto himself was not an extremely poor person. He had a house he owned in San Isidro and I think a little pulperia or grocery store there. It’s been too long for me to remember details about each one of them. He qualified to be paid for everything he had and to be given transportation back to his house, but didn’t qualify to get a land gift from the government.

Along the coast, another leader, Ivo Salazar, lived in his thatched roof house, if you can call it house, near the mouth of the Rio Llorona. An interesting fact here is that this is also the place where in 1974, Nicholas Wessberg, the founder of Cabo Blanco Biological Reserve, was killed by a man who wanted to rob him. And, being such a particular character, quite apart from being

a Swedish citizen, his death was a good push for the creation of Corcovado, or at least that's how we used it, I'm sure to his delight wherever he is.

Among the leaders was Don Felix Avellán, who owned Sirena, the landing strip and hundreds of cattle and pigs. Don Felix was the man from whom the American gold miner and myself had rented horses in 1965, during my first encounter with Osa.

Another one was Francisco Marengo. He lived about an hour and half's hike into the forest from Sirena. He and Felix were the big ones, and I mean big ones. They had hundreds if not thousands of hectares of land that they called theirs. Those guys left the park with cheques for millions of colones in their hands.

These occupants were settlers and hunters; they were logging to turn the forest into farms, and for some of them into their second farms. Others were just settlers, who owned nothing outside, and others were simply land speculators. They would clear the forest, make it better in their eyes and sell it to somebody who wanted a farm, not a piece of forest.

So there were all kinds of humans there; 160 half made farms which together amounted to 5% of the park. Nothing huge from the air, but put 5% of 40,000 hectares together, and it's quite a bit of land. These farms obviously closed in with new forest pretty quickly after the humans left.

Their presence there was not only legally impossible, but also detrimental from the ecological perspective and the objectives of the park. They simply couldn't remain there. There were too many; they were logging, hunting, etc., working against the principles of conservation.

Among them, I remember this particular man, Rojas from Perez Zeledon, on the other side of Sirena, actually on the side of Llorona, not too far from Ivo's house. The Llorona River has a beautiful mouth – very nice for swimming – and an arch carved by the waves out of the rocky cliffs, and tall trees as you don't see in other parts of the park: a paradise.

One day I was hiking there, I saw this beautiful, beautiful lady, with green or blue eyes, very white complexion, like “an amazon”, as we see in movies, a really voluptuous beautiful lady, swimming with a small kid. So I approached and met Maria Rojas for the first time and her son. Through them, I met her father. He was the first person who said, “Don Alvaro, I agree with what you are doing, this place has to be saved. Please take my property and make it into your headquarters. And if you can, pay me later.”

I breathed with relief because I could then say that the park service had a base of a few square metres in the park. The rest was claimed by somebody, except the lagoon and the beach. Ah, it was obviously the wrong place to have a base, but at least we could land a kilometre or two on the other side of the river. I almost stepped on a huge *fer-de-lance*, two metres long. A huge thing. I never saw a *terciopelo* so close to my feet. This Señor Rojas was a farmer in Perez Zeledon. Maria, I learned, was an educated person. She went into the restaurant business in Perez and San José, crêpe restaurants. Her little son, whose name I don't remember – I have seen him a lot on TV these days – he went to Mexico and became an actor in soap operas and other things, and maybe movies too, he became a star for different reasons.

His grandfather was a hero, a star to me for conservation reasons. I remember I was able to pay him something later but he didn't own any land. He was right on the *zona maritima-terrestre* and nobody can have land title there. Years later, when I got the Getty Prize of \$25,000, a fortune for me since the exchange rate was 8.5 colones per dollar. I remember that I thought I was so rich that I wondered “what do I do with this money?” Mario Boza immediately said, “of course, I am going to put it in the bank and make interest out of it.” “Hm, OK.” I wanted to create prizes with my enormous wealth. I would put it in the bank, make interest, and out of the interest an annual prize for the best neighbour of the park system, a prize for the best ranger; there were four or five prizes that I expected to get out of the interest of my \$25,000. You can imagine how naïve I was. I actually created the prizes, and put the money in the bank. Years later I realised it was a mistake, it was not really that much money, maybe a \$100 for each prize. Also, it was very hard to find the winners. So I decided to eliminate all this nonsense and buy computers for the park service. That's how most of my Getty money ended up.

When the computers arrived, of course nobody had seen those strange machines in our offices. This was only 1983, but that was the beginning of the 21st century for the park system. The impact of computerised work in the park system was a pioneer thing and caused a second order change in many respects, slowly but obviously we were preparing for the new century and I don't regret it at all. I remember handing out a few prizes to Rojas and others, but that was the end of my philanthropy. Mario can now count millions he has got on top of the \$25,000, that I don't have, and during some critical times, I kind of envy him, but in a good spirited way.

Francisco Marengo, another leader, had a large property adjacent to Rio Pavo. It was located right on the trail from Sirena to the Golfo Dulce side of the

peninsula and goes to another ranger station called Los Patos. That's where Marengo's farm was. He was a chunky, tough man, not as loud and noisy as the others. He was serious and really got my respect, a very nice person. I could see why people respected him so much. He had a wife, a bunch of children and a bunch of sisters. One of them was Doña Braulia, who lived down the beach toward Carate with her daughters in her own farm. I ran into Marengo's and Avellán's family's descendants when I went to Osa five years ago to work for the government again in that region, they are the children of back then. One of them now owns an eco-tourism forest site, on the edge of Piedras Blancas National Park, an activity never imagined by his grand father.

Don Felix owned a commissariat which is the equivalent of a minisuper in the midst of Corcovado. People hiked for hours to come and buy stuff from him. Where the big building of the Sirena Ranger Station is today, was where his commissariat was. He also owned thousands of hectares in the Rio Oro, outside of Corcovado. If you come from Puerte Jimenez to Carate, the last part in the lowlands after the hilly part of the road, you come to Rio Oro. In 1963, when I first went to Río Oro, there was a school, another airport, and another commissariat. He was the butcher in the region, he would kill cows and sell them to neighbours and villages. He was a real big shot there, and probably brought close to 30, if not more, people to this planet. He did it with the help of several women. I learned part of his story then, but now I know better how many children he had, how many ladies etc. etc.

While dealing with Felix for the purchase of his property in Sirena, he was tough on having to be paid for everything he had done. If a fence post was not counted, he would make sure I would count all the fence posts. Actually he came back with a suit against us because we had not paid for a few rotten fence posts that he had behind some trees. We had to pay him more because of that. I didn't want to argue with these people, just wanted to get them out of the way for conservation and restoration. For their sake and for my sake, and especially for the sake of the park.

The head of ITCO then was a man who we should build a statue in his honour. I have done so on some occasions, Don Jose Manuel Salazar Navarrete is his name. His deputy at ITCO was Don Rodrigo Chavez, now passed away. These two men adored President Oduber; they adored me and adored the parks idea. Upon my requests, everything was yes, yes, yes. Millions of dollars of IDA were committed to save Corcovado, and with time, in other parks.

For example, 5,000 hectares of one of the big properties expropriated by IDA to give land to the landless in the Tárcoles area, they gave to the park service as a gift, and that is Carara National Park today. Simply a gift. They called me and told me if I wanted a new park, I could have it. "What the hell is that?" I said. They took me to see it and I fell in love with Carara. Luckily, it has the second largest population of macaws in the country, the first one being in Corcovado and Osa.

Going back to Don Jose Manuel, he was a tough decision maker, a very efficient decision maker, a very good friend of president Oduber, and he was instrumental in paving the road for everything else that followed. He sent his teams of appraisers and others, and came with funds to pay the squatters, to transport them, to give them food and money for a few months for them to resettle, to purchase the farm on the other side of the peninsula to move those who had the right to get land in exchange leaving for the park, etc.

So soon after, a series of appraisals began to flourish. Then of course, came the arguments such as: we don't take that amount of money, it's more than that, etc. Then, the second wave of upgraded appraisals, maybe a third wave and finally the government had to make a decision "You have to take it or leave it. We can't keep going up and up, appraisal after appraisal. We don't know how far you want to go, but this is what your land is worth and some of you will also get land here in the area. The rest of you will have to get on planes and boats and leave."

In the process of feeding them for several months, first I made a big mistake, to give them the food directly. I should have thought more about that. We, the park service trying to buy rice, beans, eggs, etc. and then try to distribute them among two hundred families scattered throughout the park? Illogical, but we did it, until some intelligence came to our mind, "Why don't we just give them the money and have them buy the food like they have always done it?". Oh my goodness, that's a great idea ... That was easier but dangerous. They would not take cheques ... Sometimes I had one, two million on top of my desk, and we had to put the money in envelopes for each family ... Humans doing this? That was dangerous, but I had to trust my people, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to do it.

The trick to be able to do that legally, I mean to be able to have cash in hand and deliver it to them, and just have them sign a receipt, was because I asked the president to declare Corcovado a national emergency situation, a national disaster area, which it was, at least in my opinion and that of President Oduber. I asked the president to sign it for three months, then again three

months, then another three months until somebody said, “hey, can’t do it anymore.” With the emergency declaration in place, I didn’t have to go to the controller-general, treasury, etc. What is today the Comisión Nacional de Emergencia the National Emergency Commission, was called something different back then, but it was the same stuff. They would get the millions, they would pass it on to me with cheques, I would cash the cheque, put the money on the table, put them in envelopes and give it to the park’s temporary occupants, wow ... I don’t know how I am still free, but as I said, it was a very dangerous venture. But that’s the way it was done. That was possible because President Oduer trusted us fully.

On one occasion, IDA people and I carried 30 million colones, which was a huge amount back then, in cheques, in a little suit case. That was the first attempt to give cheques away to pay for land rights, and to have the squatters accept them. That would have been the beginning of the end. I remember Don José Manuel telling us “This is the strategy. Take that money there and have a nice trip, but I instruct you, beg you, to try to break the corn grains off the cob. That means, you come back with several cheques less. Don’t come back to me with 100% of the checks.” I remember we almost crashed while driving to the airport, and I said “Oh God, we have 30 million colones.” We didn’t even think of ourselves.

So we flew to Sirena. We had the meeting at the mouth of the Rio Claro. As he instructed us, we put the cheques on the table. We just told them “here is a cheque for each one of you in the amount of the last appraisals, if you are interested.” I don’t even remember whether we read to them the list nor the amount, but some of the members, mostly the loud ones, were screaming, “Nobody takes a cheque. Nobody takes a cheque. We don’t accept those cheques.” I sat under the tree on the ground, just waiting. They were insulting the IDA people, everybody. I was getting sleepy. This was going on for an hour, then two hours and nobody took a cheque, until somebody said. “Oh, the hell with it. Give me the cheque”. Then others came to him and tried to grab him. We intervened and said “Wait a minute. This is a democracy. It’s fine that you don’t take it, but let him take his.” Then ... “me, too” and another “me, too” then, the line formed.

I don’t think we even had any cheques left. That’s how the cob was beginning to break, and from then on, everything pretty much went downhill. The rest, of course, had many arguments, others didn’t want their cheques, and others got the cheque and then got drunk and lost it all, all kinds of things happened.

The toughest process, well I don’t mean physically, but the toughest was how to get them all out of the park. Those that have received the cheque, as we promised, got transportation to go wherever they wanted to go. That was costly, very costly. It was hard to put them in little aeroplanes or boats etc. We decided to pay for the cows and the pigs, so we didn’t have to take them along. We would deal with that after the humans had left.

It was pretty good though. I imagine, since we don’t have data, with 160 hunters, scattered around the park, most jaguars, most pigs, most everything had been killed off. Actually, one the pictures that really moved me, and later the president, etc. – it was really depressing – was a picture of a killing not made by these people, but a killing made by someone from San José who could afford a plane, land on the beach of the park, go in with machine guns and kill an entire group of peccaries. Then they lined them up and took a nice picture of all eighty of the pigs, butchered. So, take these killers, and then take the families of the squatters, and the population of animals must have been pretty much diminished. We left lots of meat for them to grow back, especially for the jaguars. Cows and pigs were uncared for and they were eaten up. It was really easy to encounter skulls of cows eaten by the jaguars. Their populations grew back very fast, up to the point when Dr. Eduardo Carillo came back to record the high population of pigs and jaguars and the problems that came back in the future. Later, I remember that we were able to sell some cows and pigs left behind, the rest disappeared as food. Nothing was left after 3 to 5 years when these land began to restore by itself and the populations as well. I don’t know what else to say about all these people because my memory has kind of faded as to so many people and particularly interesting characters.

Once humanity left Corcovado almost at the same time, with few exceptions, then the park service breathed. You have to remember that myself and the park service had pretty much neglected the rest of the system. To get rid of this problem, we basically kept improving the rangers stations, Sirena, one near La Palma, one on the north side of the park, and one near the Rio Madrigal to the south. We kept working on trying to get these cows and pigs out of the park, began patrolling, but we never even thought of scientific monitoring, of getting data on restoration, which is too bad. I simply decided that nature would take care of itself. Every time I flew over the park, saw the light green patches go dark green and then darker green, I thought “Oh my Lord, we made it”.

Later on, people and scientists from the world began to visit Sirena, and some of them actually began to record at least what was happening around this station.

So I have seen records from Larry Gilbert, for example, with pictures from 1975, 1976 or later, documenting some of the changes taking place. I think they also did research on some of the species, especially plant and butterflies. There are pictures where you can see that Sirena was pretty much a big farm, and when you go today, the only thing open is the airport with big trees along its edges, where there used to be just fence posts and barbed wire dividing the airport from the pastures. The rest, forget it. What scientists didn't do, we didn't do either.

Then came people like Dr. Eduardo Carillo, who started monitoring the populations of jaguars, pigs, and anything that could be captured by cameras, tracks and animal dumps. He and his students began organised monitoring in the park, which was good, very good, because it gave us planners and administrators indicators of what was going on. Their work told us in the early 2000s, that something was no good with the park. The weakening of protection programs during the 1990s, was having a huge impact on park populations. The hunters were devastating the wild pigs to the limit of extinction and, although everybody knew about the hunting, nobody could tell the gravity of the situation until Dr. Carillo and his colleagues showed us their results. The information prompted in me the resolution to do something about it. The Osa Campaign to raise \$30 million was started, and little old me went back to the field as regional director for the Ministry of Environment in Osa for three years from 2003 until 2006. Corcovado got another opportunity when, with regained high motivation of the staff, the help of the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and later, from the Costa Rican government, the park got back the protection it desperately needed. But the story of my last deep involvement with the Osa will have to wait for another opportunity to be written.

The work and advice from research and scientists are key for the understanding and management of protected areas, especially today, with fast changing conditions due to increased human pressures and global warming effects on ecosystems world-wide.

As I did forty years ago, today I face the new challenges with enthusiasm and optimism. As Mario and I used to say to ourselves when confronting huge challenges, "It ain't gone ... until its gone; in the meantime, we can and we must fight like hell". No evil forces can win when confronted with motivation and determination.

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